

ROBERT BROWNING

POET AND MAN

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Robert Browning: the poet and the man.



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ROBERT BROWNING

He said, " What's time?
Leave Now for dogs and apes!
Man has Forever!"
(A Grammarian's Funeral)

" You'll look at least on love's remains,
A grave's one violet:
Your look ?—that pays a thousand pains.
What's death ? You'll love me yet ! "
(Pippa Passes)

ROBERT BROWNING

THE POET AND THE MAN

ROBERT BROWNING was born at Camberwell on May 7, 1812. Of his birthplace no trace is to be found: the early home seems to have been swept away in that march of civilization which makes the Camberwell of to-day so little like the home of romance. Yet in "poor old Camberwell" lay the romantic region of his soul, Browning ever declared.

The only memorial of Browning the seeking lover finds is Browning Hall, once York Street Independent Chapel, where the Browning family worshipped and where Browning was

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being an artist, dreams and ambitions which had to give way to the necessity of earning a living. His father turned away contemptuously from his paintings, so he accepted a position in the Bank of England, in whose service he remained a trusted and loyal official till he was able to retire on a pension. In Browning's poems we see the father, who "was a scholar and knew Greek"—the father implanting and fostering that love of learning, directing artistic faculties in his son that had been denied expansion in his own life. Also we see the father described in Browning's letters—the father who was worlds away from him in poetic ideals, who lingered back in the eighteenth century,

with the formalism of Pope, while his son was pushing on tumultuously to the romanticism of the twentieth century itself.

Browning's love and gratitude to his parents amounted to a passion. He pictures the deep kindliness of his father, who would cloak a self-sacrificing action by cheerful absurdities about inclination; in his ungrudging generosity in the printing of poems he professed never to understand. In a letter of later life he refers to these payments of his father. "When I think of the many authors who have had to fight their way through all sorts of difficulties, I have no reason to be proud of my achievements," he declared. "My good father sacrificed

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a fortune to his convictions; he could not bear with slavery and accepted a humble bank office in London. He secured for me all the ease and comfort that a literary man needs to do good work."

Of his mother, he declared that the connexion between them was no fanciful thing. They joyed and suffered together. He was heir to her delicate nervous system, to her passionately religious temperament, to her musician's soul. She understood and probably fathomed the depths which the father was entirely ignorant of. He loved this prolonged relation of childhood he enjoyed with them till his marriage. He had never calculated upon changing it. Marriage, he con-

fided to Miss Barrett, had never seemed possible to him, and at thirty-three he was confronted with an idea he had believed to be far remote, if ever probable, and the startling fact that the easy, dependent life of home was over, the responsibility of maintaining a home of his own was pressing upon him. He had supposed the finding of a wife impossible, he confided to Miss Barrett, the chances were against it. On chance one can calculate, he asserted, but not on Providence, and she was in his opinion, he wrote, the direct gift of Providence to him. It was again upon the generous father he had to draw for means for this marriage, for, urgent as the necessity for secrecy was,

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he would not wound the good father and kind mother to the heart by withholding this confidence. So little had Browning's poems brought him that he could not calculate upon even fifty pounds a year from them, "fifty or sixty horrible pounds a year, on which one lives famously at Ravenna," he writes, with grim humour, for the fact that his marriage was only possible because Miss Barrett had an income of her own pressed very sorely upon him.

Few young lovers realize when they light their torches at the "Sonnets from the Portuguese" that they are using the words of Elizabeth Barrett to Robert Browning. The circumstances of that human ro-

mance are well known, the gracious words of recognition from one poet to another, in Miss Barrett's "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," the grateful acknowledgment of them by Browning, whose life at this time was one of long-drawn-out desolateness, he confessed unreservedly to Mr Gosse. The resources of the good father were but limited, and the poet was now publishing, in the cheapest methods he could devise, monthly booklets under the general title of "Bells and Pomegranates."

It was the dead slack of fortune's tide with Browning. He had become unduly sensitive to the whip-lash of criticism ever curling about his shoulders. A very blight seemed to have

fallen upon his efforts; friends had fallen away; his brilliant dreams of being able to impress himself upon mankind by means of the drama had fallen a ruined mass at his feet. Macready had used him vilely, we find him writing to his friend Domett.

To have a popular poetess pronounce it as her opinion that his poetry was rich, ripe, opulent, packed close as a pomegranate at its ruddy core, was food for gratitude to a heart whose first principle was gratitude, and a correspondence followed from which Browning the man emerges, freed from that cloak of dramatic expression he chose to drape himself in. He confides how discouraged he is; he would fain be done

with England and get away to his heart in Italy. He does not now expect the fixed stars before his time; we learn how he encouraged and comforted himself under public disregard and contempt. We get his private opinion of the great British public, expressed later in the "Ring and the Book," and are told the secret of his fortitude and deep patience under the playful lash of the critic, learn of secret resources of strength and delight, which enable him to live cheerfully under circumstances so chilling and apparently futile. Here we see him shaping his life, determined to be a poet, if not *the* poet. "I can wait three hundred years," Miss Barrett reports him to

have said, during that apparently abortive period of early middle life. He was grateful to her, he declared, for helping him to cover a crushing defeat.

In these letters we are made acquainted directly, without cloak or screen, with his high aims, with his clear consciousness of his value to the world, with his despair of ever being able to give directly, without dramatic veil, of some other human story, the truth within him. He could only make men and women speak, he declared, and feared the light within him: his work, he asserted, was to present from every angle of incidence certain truths he believed it his duty to keep bright—scattered rays of a

Light which (he writes) broke upon him as a whole one.

He asserts here, as in his poems, that he has a secret, and leaves it to his correspondent's intuition, as he does to his readers, to divine it. He trusted her, at least, to get at the truth of him.

He had a few "fire-eyes," he declared, but great waste tracts between; the "fire-eyes" were tending to extinction, he asserted, and the ice between was encroaching. Yet the valleys between his Vesuvius' eruptions were equally characteristic of him, his apparently waste land probably the best part of him, equally characteristic at least.

He despairs of ever being able to

communicate the depths of him to anyone. It is only when he is pained he can disclose himself freely; under raptures he is cold, unresponsive as a stone; under joy he is silent, his raptures he must shut in upon themselves; but when pained he must write it out—*must*.

Emotions which transcend the common experience can only be presented by hints and gleams: show but one point of superiority to the common taste, and ridicule falls.

There is more in life than rises to the surface and meets the eye, he declares in his letters, as in his poems. Were this world all, all would be producible and available for use, as it is with the body; but with the soul

what is to be developed afterwards is the prime thing, and it instinctively asserts its rights to existence.

The finger of God, we find, really was the finger of God to him, no poetic property: its guidance he felt every minute of his life. That "Hand" which impelled was veritable force, he believed, that quarter or so of an hour of inspiration was rapture, as we see it in the opening of the "Ring and the Book." All the rest, we read, was pure drudgery, performed because the inspiration demanded to be enshrined.

He started life with boundless ambitions, he writes. He was educated to be a poet by a father whose own artistic ambitions had been thwarted

—he meant to be a great poet, knew his own worth to his time. Although he had acquired the reputation of being purely dramatic and detached, it was his own soul he related to his puppets, his own metal he ran into these “moulds,” he confided. We find him quoting as his rule of conduct Goethe’s lines:

“ Be it your unerring rule
 Ne’er to contradict a fool,
 For if folly choose to brave you,
 All your wisdom cannot save you.”

He regrets his deep secretiveness, his mask grows irksome, time would throw it off, mankind would know him better in time to come. For the present he was helpless—“against pure lying,” he writes sadly, “a man

has no defence." "Critics! hucksters!" he exclaims, "I have my own soul, my own secret delights. I shall not go and die in Rome, and be it known I do not lay my resources of strength open to everybody." That Keats should die of disappointment, and Tennyson go softly all his days for a gruff word or two from the reviewers, he could not understand.

At Miss Barrett's bidding he promises to drop the dramatic cloak, to leave the moulds of other human stories, which, he had confessed, he found everywhere to his hand, into which to run his own fused metal. From the moulds themselves he received nothing, he declared, but a support for his own truths, not a

grain of new gold, silver, or brass do you get from other people's stories. After choosing your mould you go boldly on your own resources, he asserted, and are justified to yourself: that is all.

This advice of disguise was followed by Miss Barrett herself later, and the slight veil of the title, "Sonnets from the Portuguese," was thrown to conceal the identity of the author and divert the world from the personal freight of emotions the sonnets carried, the secret delights of a soul drawn from death to life by love.

"Guess now who holds thee!"—"Death," I said. "But, there, The silver answer rang,—Not Death, but love."

It is in these letters to the secluded lady of his love that we find the man Browning, and in the Sonnets see the reflection of the course of events so momentous to him. His expressions of gratitude are unbounded.

At that time every man seemed to have a friend, and she had lifted the reproach from him that he had none, he declared. He had never dreamed of any woman being able to draw his love, and at thirty-three had settled down to do without it. It is a bleak business talking to the wind, he writes, but not being listened to does not affect him in the least, certainly he will not walk with a hand winker-wise to please the powers that be. He makes a habit of dining and wining

and dancing, rather than seem a piece of neglected merit. If the public had bought his poems, his good father would have had less to pay on his account, and he would have had money to spend.

But if they would not !

Nor even praise !

Then let them decamp to the crows, and leave him to his garden and his soul. His father and mother would have been proud if he had found success, and their pleasure would have pleased him, and for that he would have been grateful. He has even lost taste for reading, this depressing period of his life: he even looks languidly at his once beloved "Andromeda."

The desolation of that apparently abortive period of his life was dispelled by his marriage. He turned from the scene of his discomfiture and disappointments to make a home in Italy, freed from that armour of dining and wining he was so sadly to gird on again fifteen years later, bereft of those

“ Silent silver lights and darks undreamed of:
Where I hush and bless myself in silence.”

“ God be thanked, the meanest of
His creatures
Boasts two soul sides, one to face the
world with,
One to show a woman when he loves
her,”

he wrote exultingly from Florence.

How Browning, the great husband, in a century famous for its great husbands and wives, could have seriously been credited with writing a long poem defending conjugal infidelity is a mystery.

II

THE first poem in Browning's published works is "Pauline." He was then twenty years of age, but he confesses to very precocious efforts, verses at six years of age, drawings still earlier: there had been a vast mass of childish verse, a selection of which, called "Incondita," had been submitted to outside opinion for advice as to publishing.

The advice was unfavourable, and the volume compiled at twelve years of age was ruthlessly swept into oblivion, along with all other record of his early life.

The poem of "Pauline" would also have been swept away, if the author could have had his way, for, almost as soon as it was published, although at the expense of an aunt, Browning recalled the sheets from the publishers, stowed them at the housetop, and believed himself done with it for ever, as with "Incon-dita."

It was written before the poet had what is called "found himself," before his genius crystallized. It is altogether foolish and *not* boy-like, he writes to Miss Barrett, who urged her natural desire to see it: it was ambiguous, feverish he assured her.

In "Pauline" Browning holds up

the mirror to his past. Its primary emotion was a burst of gratitude to Shelley, whose poetry had opened up the deeps of his soul. His childhood's idol had been Byron, but at fourteen years of age he came upon the poetry of Shelley and Keats, which summarily displaced the poetry of Byron, together with his childhood's early faith.

This burst of emotion is recorded in "Pauline," that swell of soul when first, as he records in "Paracelsus," "the waters of my life outburst" at the divining rod of Shelley and Keats, as he saw his own thoughts recorded, his own fancies justified. "Sun treader," he exclaims, in deep gratitude,

“ Live thou for ever,
And be to all what thou hast been to
me.”

This influence of poetry on the soul to quicken it to life was fact of experience to Browning. He believed that poetry should do for all what it had done for him. At the time of writing “ Pauline,” love for Shelley was an obsession with him. He had followed him into professing Atheism, a period of denial of his early Christian faith, revolt and estrangement from his home circle, pain and grief to his parents, he never cared to remember. To his wondering, boyish imagination, this curious exaltation stirred in him by the poetry of Shelley and Keats could mean nothing

less than that the spirits of Shelley and Keats were impressing their passionate lover into their service on earth, to carry on the message they failed to deliver. So Tennyson believed, for a time, that his dead friend Hallam's soul had touched his, so Keats believed the soul of Shakespeare inspired his felicities.

This hypothesis for a very curious experience was rejected later by both Browning and Tennyson, but, says Browning, in "Sludge the Medium," "because a boy says he sees horses and chariots in the sky, does it follow there was nothing there? "

The poem of "Pauline" is purely confessional, wrote Mr Fox, the great Unitarian, on its appearance. "The

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whole composition is of the Spirit spiritual. The scenery is in the chamber of thought; the agencies are powers and passions; the events are transitions from one state of spiritual existence to another."

It was, says Browning himself, the only record of a vast scheme simmering in his mind at that time, a vast, formless ambition to express himself, through either music, painting, or poetry. A note prefixed to the poem indicated the author's difficulty in choosing which branch of art was to be his medium: "only this crab remained," he confided later, "of the shapely Tree of Life in my fool's Paradise."

"Pauline" is a review of Brown-

ing's past as it lay back from his twenty years of life.

He looks back with passionate regret to that glow of faith of early childhood; he feels aged in emotion, worn with thought, mocked at by ambition, fevered with desire to rise and express the thronging ideas within him, derides his ambition to rival his soul's idol—Shelley himself.

A restless passion for knowledge alone leads him on; his bright imagination eats at his heart, the visible beauty of the world enthrals him, he longs to seclude himself into solitary places, to shut his rapture away from the world, he throbs to the thought of Keats:

“ I set her on a pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long,
For sidelong would she bend and sing
A fairy song.”

Like Shelley, he felt that

“ Awful loveliness,
Whom Spirit fair, thy spells did bind
To fear himself and love all human
kind.”

But God, the God of his childhood,
was gone: “ Some dark spirit sitteth
in his seat.”

Power was there in the void, but
love was gone. That early boyish pas-
sion that had watched beside the
tomb of “ Him of weeping Olivet ”
was gone—nothing of it remained:
he saw there now but “ a scene of

degradation, ugliness, and tears, a sullen page in human chronicles best forgotten."

From the dark, the shadowy hand of Shelley alone beckoned with promise of support. His early faith is recalled: he now sees but power at the heart of things: he avows he will give all earth's reward to regain his early faith—but to believe again and humbly teach the faith.

This poem is a document of value, without which "Paracelsus" and "Sordello" would be difficult to decipher. That Browning hated it, and would have consigned it to oblivion, together with the mood that produced it, is understandable. It is the prelude to that twofold presentment

of his soul's romance in "Paracelsus" and "Sordello."

In childhood he had been passionately devout. At fourteen the wells of his poetic being were drawn by the poetry of Shelley and Keats. This mystical call to poetry is one of the gems of the poem of "Paracelsus"—the ring of airy poets winning him to their wan troop leaning and loving, calling him to their shadowy circle; and all the tumultuous movement of boundless ambition is in the lyric of the men who could not alter their point of view:

"Our work is done, we have no heart,
To mar our work—we cried."

At the time of writing "Pauline,"

though but twenty years of age, he was aged in emotion as Pauline's lover feels. A feverish literary past lay behind him, he had piles of verse in his desk at twelve years of age, was the passionate boy lover, of the gifted and beautiful sisters Sarah and Eliza Flower, years his seniors, and, under Shelley's influence, had cast himself adrift from the faith of his childhood.

His narrow home circle had come to disgust and weary him: the simple religion of his parents seemed contemptible.

From his avowed Atheism he emerged to a Pantheistic-Theosophic faith, his stage at the time of writing "Pauline"—a period of barrenness and despair.

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This stage of egoistic horror the poem of "Pauline" mirrors—a time of intellectual pride, mocking unbelief, when mind was his only anchorage, art his only sure ground, study his only solace.

Vague colossal schemes of work were projected: "O God! where do they tend—these struggling aims!" exclaims Pauline's lover in despair: "What is it I hunger for but God."

In "Pauline" is first displayed that acute self-consciousness which John Stuart Mill wrote was the deepest he had ever met with in a sane human being.

There we first come to know that eager mind, that insatiate thirst for knowledge, that soul responsive to

every influence of beauty. But visible beauty has ceased to appeal. Pauline's lover is heart-hungry, soul hungry. He yearns for something outside himself, some beauty above the magic of spring or effulgence of summer, above the witchery of flowing water, the sublimity of the midnight, the overflowing of gold into the world morning and evening, the cold, grey spell of the dawn.

The restless egoism of his soul consumes him. Mind turns in upon itself, intellect seems the only God, from the myriad-chambered brain despair echoes, from his tortured heart comes appeal for help to realize the powers chained within him, some outside reinforcement of himself to lift him out

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of his egoism, beyond himself, more light, more love, more faith.

Andromeda, with eyes upturned, symbolizes the situation for him:

“Andromeda, with eyes upturned,
secure some God
To save will come in thunder from the
stars.”

Art, through which to display all the beauty conserved in his soul, is his mistress, her, with whom he first thought to foot life's temple floor, he confides from that water-lapped stair in Venice, till poor Humanity, “ravishingest lady,” claimed him as mistress.

WHAT drew Browning from the Slough of Despond of "Pauline" to the firm ground and lofty note of faith of "Paracelsus" he ever zealously guarded from the world.

Every record of his early life was destroyed. "Pauline" was recalled from the publishers very shortly after being printed.

What changed the despairing cry of "Pauline" to the clear aspiration of "Paracelsus," the baffled egoism of the one to the serene altruism of the other? What lifted him out of his morass of struggling ambitions, confused purposes, shadowy aims, to the

path straight and sure as a bird's flight across the trackless air, is his own secret.

Rightly or wrongly, he believed his spiritual experiences were his own property; to give them to the world direct would not benefit it, and would leave him very poor indeed, he declared. They were his alone, made visible by his art, for those who cared to look for them.

“ A peep through my window if folk prefer;
But, please you, no foot over threshold of mine.”

To allow the rabble to make a rout of rarities inside, to cast his pearls before swine, to place his most sacred emotions directly between the coarse

thumb and finger of the world was not demanded, to cast his secret raptures to the critic to juggle with was not in the bond.

In a note prefixed to the first edition of "Paracelsus," he wrote that "the author has shown a mind at work, has displayed a mood in its rise and progress, suffering the agency to be discerned in its effects alone . . . Were the scenes stars the reader's co-operating fancy must connect chasms and scattered lights into one constellation—a lyre or a crown."

It is "divine shame," says Carlyle, "which compels man to enwrap his deepest spiritual experiences in 'clothes'—a mystic grove-encircled

shrine for the holy in man." As boldly as Carlyle draped his spiritual experiences in "Sartor Resartus," or Bunyan in the "Pilgrim's Progress," or Dante in the "Divina Commedia," Browning wrapped his in the robe of "Paracelsus," mystic and scientist, and of "Sordello," mediaeval poet and patriot, whom Dante encountered on his pilgrimage among those who had had great chances and failed in their trust.

As Dante "dared to write his autobiography in colossal cipher into universality," as Emerson expresses it, so Browning ran his own soul's metal, glowing and molten, into the moulds of "Paracelsus" and "Sordello," telling the story twice over as

the wise thrush sings his song he
notes.

“ These blottings,” says Paracelsus,
“ chronicle a life,
A whole life, and my life: Nothing to
do,
No problem for the fancy, but a life
Spent and decided, wasted past re-
trieve
Or worthy beyond its peers.”

“ Who will may know the secret’st
workings of my soul,”

exclaims Paracelsus:

“ Who will may hear Sordello’s story
told . . . ”
“ Who would has heard Sordello’s
story told.”

As “ Pauline ” related Browning’s
point of view at twenty, “ Paracel-

sus " reviews the past from a new point of view at twenty-two.

He had now come to look back with remorse and grief at the stage " Pauline " depicted. He never cared to recall the time when his intellect fought with his faith, when intellectual pride dominated him, when his imagination both delighted and tortured him, when mind was his god, the shifting ground of emotion of the sublime his eluding passion, his only firm ground the exercise of art by which to weave beauty and knowledge into language, or music, or painting.

" Paracelsus " reflects in art's mysterious mirror the scroll of the poet's past from boyhood, as " Pauline,"

too, had reflected those drifting years.

In "Paracelsus" is embalmed that home love and sympathy always recalled with deep emotion by Browning. In faithful Festus, dear Michal, we have silhouettes of the devoted father, the saintly mother. Gentle Michal, "whose countenance though saintly was not sad," who sang alone, who divined the secrets of Paracelsus as Festus, scholar and sympathizing supporter, could not. The first poem of Browning fittingly enshrines this parent pair who, for many a year, watched, as they believed, their swan's nest floating out to sea.

The true romance of life lay in

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his soul, Browning declared from first to last. Poor old Camberwell and its sunsets and great stars, its crescent moons, its rainbows, was his region of romance, he asserted.

In the poem of "Paracelsus," London, with its flashing domes by day, its mysterious glow by night, transmutes, in the alembic of imagination, into far-off Wurtzburg; the flowing Thames becomes the softly gliding Mayne, whose music soothed and eased the perplexity and pain of Paracelsus; the good father becomes grave Festus, full of doubts and anxieties, following a career he could not understand, the sympathetic mother merges into understanding Michal,

who divined the deeps with gentle
raillery:

"Then Aureole is God's commis-
sary," she replies.

"He would be great and grand and
all for us"

"No, sweet,
Not great and grand. If I can serve
my race
'Tis well."

Full well Paracelsus knew, he said,
he would never be served by those in
whose service he elected to spend his
powers.

"Must I tear up my very vitals?"
he queries, passionately, of Festus.
"You, who are you, forsooth! Will
you divine nothing? . . ."

He reminds Festus that it was he
and Michal themselves who had led

him on to these high dreams, lofty ambitions, and now:

“When I would have triumph in
their eyes,
A glad cheer in their voices, Michal
weeps,
And Festus ponders gravely.”

He reveals himself to Festus, as Saul among the prophets, believing his friend would understand, “though all beside were sand blind.” He relates to this faithful friend his new plans, new purposes, a sudden alteration of point of view, which compels the burying of old plans, old aims, old dreams, “inconsequent as they were beautiful, their grave must be heaped with Cassia, Sandalbud, and

faint sweetnesses of Egypt's worm-eaten shrouds."

To Festus is sung the song of the men who could not change their minds:

"The sad rhyme of the men who
proudly clung
To their first fault and withered in
their pride."

The utterances of Paracelsus are as of one raving to Festus as he relates the break-up of a past despair, relates the secret of his commission, confesses the still voice from without which had whispered its plea for service, breathing its mystic promise: ". . . and when he ceased my brow was sealed his own." Festus, too, re-

counts the past, relates the growth he had watched over from its childhood. He knows this new departure is no ill-considered choice, no sudden fancy of an ardent boy—it seemed earnest and resolved, a determination to win renown by patient toil. He had noted the sudden pause, significant and strange, the new ardour. He saw the sudden change from contest to blank idleness—an ostentatious show of past defeat.

To convince his friends, Paracelsus traces his mood from its uprise—from childhood when some power without repressed or urged—something that whispered in the evening and spoke out in the morning—something that passed to which he turned

scarce consciously, "as turns a water snake when fairies cross his sleep." You were beside me, he reminds Festus. You saw me plunge into their pursuits whom fame is lavish to attest the lords of mind.

"Then came a slow
And strangling failure. . . . I would
slur over
That struggle; suffice it that I loathed
myself
As weak compared with them, yet
felt somehow
A mighty power was brooding, taking
shape."
"Are there not, Festus, are there not,
dear Michal,
Two points in the adventure of the
diver,
One—when a beggar he prepares to
plunge,
One—when a prince he rises with his
pearl."

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“ If I stoop
Into a dark, tremendous sea of
cloud
It is but for a time; I press God’s
lamp
Close to my breast; its splendour,
soon or late,
Will pierce the gloom: I shall emerge
one day.”

Life had baffled Paracelsus, he
said, because he had not seen the
worth of love in man’s estate:

“ And what proportion love should
hold with power.
In my own heart love had not been
made wise
To trace love’s faint beginnings in
mankind,
To know even hate is but a mask of
love’s,
To see a good in evil, and a hope
In ill-success.”

It was from Aprile's failure he learned his own deep error, he says.

"God!" he exclaims, "how I essayed
To live like that mad poet for a while."

From his early failure he learned sympathy with humanity who are but like:

"Plants in mines which never see the sun,
But dream of him and guess where he may be,
And do their best to climb and get to him."

The poem of "Paracelsus" reflects the uprise of the emotion of faith, from the child's first perception of, and faith in, its own powers,

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to the last faith, that his powers and faculties were instruments of God through which to speak to man. We see the little lad leaping for joy to beg Festus have no more care for him:

“Since I have just determined to
become
The greatest and most glorious man
on earth,”

follow aspirings and failings, prophetic insight that foreknew failure, prophetic insight that saw success, meet shadowy guides, follow a soul through tortures of doubt, depths of despondencies of ever being able to realize its chained powers, fiery convictions, crowding thought,

goose cacklings and hissings heard at
the heels of his aspiration to produce
poetry,

“ So vast
In scope. . . gain knowledge . . . the
secret of the world
Of man, and man's true purpose,
path and fate.”

When “ Paracelsus ” and “ Sor-
dello ” were written Browning's soul
was burdened with a set of new and
strange experiences pressing to be
cast out. Each poem is the story
of unfolding personality, evolution
through aspiration and failure to a
fleshly break-up out of which Para-
celsus the Theosophist emerged to
Paracelsus the Christian mystic, Sor-
dello sprang to be champion of Hu-

manity, of the Church, the spiritual party, his attitude, rigid in death, protesting for the Cause he was not to live to fight for.

“ Paracelsus ” records Browning’s conception of the evolutionary hypothesis before Darwin formulated it: the poem is his earnest record of the scheme as it appeared to his imagination—the planetary emergence and preparation—the centre fire—the frozen stillness—the breath of Spring on life’s minutest beginnings—the rising sweep of evolution up at last to man the apparent consummation of the process. But man is not man as yet, says Paracelsus, “ while only here and there a star dispels the gloom, here and there a

towering mind overtops his fellows.”
“Make no more giants, God,” he
cries, “but raise the race at once.”

Browning alone of poets disclaimed the pose of a being set apart, wrapping his poet cloak around him in pride, as the lofty are prone to do. He was no Stylites on a pillar in his mysticism. He alone believed that the experiences of the few should be the experiences of the many—that a butcher should paint, a baker rhyme, that all should know that magic:

“The sudden element that changes
things,
That sets the undreamed-of rapture
at his hand
And puts the cheap old joy in the
scorned dust.”

Man, says Paracelsus, apparently the end of the evolutionary process, is really the theatre of a further evolutionary process transferred from physical to spiritual, his real business being to learn the laws for a future life, develop his inward being: the opening up of his soul.

Transmutation is the law of life, says Paracelsus, all a creating of the creature to be from the creature that is, the creature for the "adventure brave and new" creates the powers to grapple with it here on earth. By what law flesh either enthrals or enthrones the soul is the discovery Paracelsus longs to make, to discover the true reason why flesh accloys the spirit was his burning quest:

“ I still must hoard and heap and
class all truths
With one ulterior purpose: I must
know! ”

To open up the way to the soul is life's purpose, he declares, and proposes to gather lore scattered all about the world to support his hypothesis. He recalls his fitness for the task, his early training towards it, “ so much time saved.” Just so much of doubt was given to warn him he stood:

“ On sufferance—not to idly gaze,
but cast
Light on a darkling race.”

Why “ Paracelsus ” “ donned the frock of heavy mail,” but could not “ join the troop of sacred knights,”

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the poem does not explain, but, says
Sordello,

“ Let youth
Become aware it had surprised a
truth,
'Twere of service to impart—can
truth be seized,
Settled forthwith, and of the captive
eased? ”

And says Paracelsus, ruefully:

“ God's intimations rather fail
In clearness than in energy; 'twere
well
Did they indicate the course to take
Like that to be forsaken,”

but it was his faith that,

“ In completed man begins anew a
tendency to God,
And to man's glory vowed I soul and
limb.

.... I go to prove my soul.
I see my way as birds their trackless
way.

I shall arrive: what time, what circuit first,
I ask not: but unless God sends his hail
Of blinding fireballs, sleet or stifling snow,
In some good time, his good time, I shall arrive."

The actual "Paracelsus," mystic, scientist, pioneer of new knowledge, touched Browning's problem at many points. He stood in the dawn of a new era, as did "Sordello," as Browning, with prophetic intuition of genius, felt the new era of his wonderful century advancing. Where his cockleshell was navigating so painfully, he saw happy boatloads floating up with the tide later. He perceived that spiritual renaissance

now upon us, as in 1835 no other did, he saw the day when his blue would be in every one's line, and Hobbs, Nobbs and Stokes would gorge upon the fruits of the mysterious thing called faith, which he wrote two long poems to depict the uprise of in himself. He saw himself standing at the door of an age that was to remake thought, bring heights upon heights of knowledge, create new arts, advance religions, produce systems, claiming to dethrone the Founder of Christianity himself for its Blavatskys, its Eddys. A daring age, a restless age, repetition of the vivid ages of expansion, following both "Paracelsus" and "Sordello."

"Paracelsus" had a spark of the true

fire, Browning believed, and with characteristic generosity paid tribute to a then discredited genius, at the same time using him as mould in which to pour his own metal, by that mystery of imagination given to the greatest.

He was related to "Paracelsus" by a mind that burned for knowledge, hoarding and classifying, to find the secret of soul, by a mind brought to temporary grief by disdain of others, by intellectual pride, an unbounded egoism in youth, but superadded in the poem is the break-up of egoism, subordination of human arrogance, typified in the fleshly break-up of the mediaeval mystic, out of which arises a new being, the Christian

mystic, to turn new knowledge on old events, declare a new message, to affirm the faiths never departed from later. It belongs to that period of life reviewed in old age by the poet:

“ A Voice spoke then which straight
 unlinked
 Fancy from fact. . . .
 The Voice said, ‘ Call my work thy
 friends.
 At Nature dost thou shrink amazed ?
 God is it who transcends.’ ”

The real “Paracelsus” was related to Browning’s thought by the mystical belief that God had had direct dealings with his soul:

“ How fortune fares with such,
 who cares ? ” he writes in “ The Two
 Poets of Croisic.”

“ Well, I care,” he answers, “ intimately care to have
Experience how a human creature
felt
In after life, who bore the burden
grave
Of certainly believing God had dealt
For once directly with him: did not
rave—
A maniac, did not find his reason
melt—
An idiot, but went on, in peace or
strife,
The world’s way, lived an ordinary
life.”

“ In a flash,” says Mr Gosse,
“ Browning saw the bearing of a
story or an incident upon his own
problem.”

In 1845 we find Miss Barrett begging the poet to speak out instead of speaking through others. What does

his title, " Bells and Pomegranates." mean? she begs to know. But it was very difficult to bring him to condescend to explanations of his work. He delayed the promised elucidation till his friend grows indignant, and when it appeared it was placed obscurely, she declared, as if he wished it to be missed. The intention of his poetry was too ambitious to be expressed by words, he wrote, so the symbol, " Bells and Pomegranates," was used. If the public did not know that they were the decorations on Aaron's priestly robe of blue—well, they ought to know their Bibles, no doubt, he thought.

The story of "Paracelsus," *mediae-*

val mystic and pioneer of knowledge, was familiar as a household tale to the father of Browning, but of his great son's rendering of it he could make nothing. Until almost the end of his life he affected humorously to be entirely befogged by his son's "Paracelsuses and Sordellos," which did not prevent him from cheerfully paying for the publication of both, however.

For Browning, from "Paracelsus" onwards, there were but two points his art could allow itself to be concerned with: God and the human soul. The easy victories of the objective artist had to be surrendered for the difficult task of the subjective:

“ If we no longer see as you of old,
'Tis we see deeper. Progress to the
bold:
You saw the body, 'tis the soul we
see.”

This selection of God and the soul as subject for his art was inexplicable to the dominant thought of his day. It could scarcely credit him with being sincere. Into vacancy, he writes, in “Christmas Eve and Easter Day,” I pour my story.

“ But,” says Carlyle, “ how often have we seen some adventurous and perhaps much censured wanderer light on some outlying neglected yet vitally momentous province; the hidden treasures of which he first discovered and kept proclaiming till the

general eye and effort were directed thither and the conquest was complete;—thereby in these his seemingly so aimless rambles, planting new standards, founding new habitable colonies in the immeasurable circumambient real of Nothingness and Night.”

To the patriot asking how he can help England, in all sincerity Browning bids him say:

“ Whoso turns to God as I do, turns
to God to praise and pray
While Jove’s planet rises yonder silent
over Africa.”

IN the poem of "Sordello" endeavour is made by Browning to relate the romance of his opening soul again.

These soul experiences had to be tumbled out pell-mell, he wrote to his friend Domett, away out in New Zealand, lest age and native secretiveness made their production impossible to him. The writing of "Sordello" gave him command of his tool, at any rate, he declared, humorously, in a simile.

"Sordello" is the romance of an unfolding personality from youth's compassing of self-perception, to

manhood's arrival at God conception—the romance of the rise of the religious sense, which requires intellectual and moral qualities of moderately high level to experience, “so complex an emotion is it,” says Professor Huxley.

The dramatic moment of the sudden opening-up of a new point of view is the recurrent note of “Sordello.” Out of tremendous emotional upheavals, truth, spiritual and actual, is represented arising: emotion is pictured as the overlord of life, lifting Sordello's view from height to height.

Dante had superseded Shelley in Browning's esteem, and with characteristic gratitude he pens apostrophe

to him, as he had done to Shelley in
 “ Pauline.”

He claims our sympathy with him
 in his attempt to handle so difficult
 a subject as soul, because:

“ Perceptions whole like that he
 sought
 To clothe reject so pure a work as
 thought,”

yet:

“ Thought is the soul of act, and must
 be fixed
 In rhyme the beautiful for ever.”

In despair of catching an audience of the living he ranges the dead around him to hear Sordello's story unfold, for:

“ 'Tis not for fate to choose
 Silence or song because she can refuse

Real eyes to glisten more, real hearts
to ache
Less oft, real brows turn smoother
for our sake."

To blend the ideal into workable stuff of life was Browning's problem at this time. By what means to convey what he conceived to be truth to mankind. He believed he knew life's secret, a secret wrested in youth from nature's close reserve, "A secret 'twere of service to impart," and the poem of "Sordello" is an attempt to pass that secret on. In it is further revealed the manner in which he proposed to attempt to graft his truth on the soul of mankind, and his life's attitude symbolized.

Though passionately secretive, he

laid bare the progress of his development under cover of the slight screen of Sordello, a mediaeval poet. How by "accident" this and "accident" that Sordello, "Slender boy in loose page's dress," developed to Sordello thirty years of age, confronted with the question of cause in which to enlist his energies at the call of what he conceived to be his duty to supply his race's need.

This evolution from boyish egoism to manly altruism is long and painful. How Sordello learns the song of Apollo in youth, loses it in young manhood, hears it again, responds to his country's need of him, juggles with his call when it comes, ponders and soliloquizes upon it, probes every

emotion as it arises, dissects, analyses, compares, classifies, correlates knowledge till firmly the choice is made at last: "No doubt 'twere fittest keep the Guelfs in rule."

We are asked to follow the development of a sequestered youth, to watch him learning the song of Apollo by means of beauty of nature, beauty of art, beauty of abounding intellect, the intoxication of human love, the ravishments of wonder, all agencies of a greater beauty, all initial to a coming splendour when:

"Inferior idols cast their borrowed
crowns
Before a coming glory: up and down
Runs arrowy fire, while earthly
forms combine

To throb the secret forth: a touch
divine
And the scaled eyeball owns the
mystic rod,
Visibly through his garden walketh
God."

As this secret presence becomes visible we see the necessity to create arise in Sordello's soul, see imagination weaving ceaselessly, craving to bridge the chasm between beauty of the visible and beauty of the invisible, watch imagination plying aimlessly, fruitlessly, till accident bringing him into contact with another poet, also singing the song of Apollo, but with

" Many a foolish gap and chasm,
Opened, like any flash that cures the
blind,
The veritable business of mankind."

We follow a mood of delicious introspection, fantastic dreaming, sweet self worship, an attempt to win popular applause by his early song of Apollo, but he is now merely a plagiarist of his former self, a leprous spot of love of applause has appeared, Apollo has vanished, when, through another "accident," a tremendous appeal to old memories, the pettish minstrel disappears, Apollo's dream again laps him wholly . . . "he expanded to himself again."

The poem presents Sordello arrived at manhood, called to take a part in the war of his time, the battle between Ghibellines and Guelfs, the party of the Emperor or the Pope, Ghibellines and the popular domi-

nant party, Guelf and the cause of the obscure people. The Ghibelline side promises immediate success, the Guelf probable defeat and obscurity; the Emperor was powerful, the Pope declining. The Emperor's party was led by Taurello Salinguerra, great man of action; the Pope's by Richard Boniface, who, as the story opens, was entrapped and held prisoner by Salinguerra, and, under the windows of the room where Sordello lies pondering his problems, elemental passion rocks with hate and lust of war, unheeding the flaming crimson sunset beauty above it.

Here the story doubles back to trace that evolution of Sordello through boyhood, far away in his

secluded castle of Goito, plied by beauty after beauty to bring to birth his soul. We see a youth

“restlessly at rest,
Full of dreams which nothing justified
Short of Apollo’s presence.”

At the end of the third book, Browning drops the cloak of Sordello to state in person that call to his country’s service which Sordello is pictured lying pondering as the story opens.

Here all disguise vanishes and the call, as he conceived it to have come to himself, is reflected upon, thus finishing in Venice a dream raised in far-off England—his dream of

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service to Humanity, poor Humanity
for whom he there demanded ma-
terial amelioration, asking too that
the whole race:

“ Might add the spirit to the body’s
 grace
And all be dizen’d out as chiefs and
 bards,”

like the fortunate few.

But humanity mistrusts him, he
says, and looks doubt of him out of
“ lashless eyes inveterately tear-
shut,” while:

“ Awkwardly enough your Moses
 smites the rock,
Though he forego the promised land,
Thereby have Satan claim his car-
 cass and

Figure as Metaphysic poet . . . Ah!
Mark ye, the dim first ooziings?
Mirabah! "

concluding with the amusing story of John the Beloved, so caricatured in a painting by his disciples that he appeared the devil domiciled, his pastoral cross blurred to the devil's twy-prong.

In book four he goes back to his task of picturing men, "each a God's germ, doomed to remain a germ unless . . . but that's the story," he declares.

In a slough of misery Sordello is presented making his way to the great Salinguerra to plead the cause of the people, Salinguerra the great man of the hour, magnificent, as-

sured, easy, master of life, man of action, contrasted with Sordello the dreamer, the idealist, poet and patriot, a slight obscure, unknown youth, passing to the interview from heart-rending specimens of callous degraded humanity finding its delirious merriment amid squalid scenes and sickening sights at the great man's gates, which enclose avenues and gardens, fountains, and trees, and shrubs, glistening statuary, terrace upon terrace, till the "grim San Pietro Palace appears."

There waits Palma with red lips and fleecy hair whose love had urged his youth, waiting for his manhood, should he embrace the cause of the Ghibellines. But he

had sights and sounds of the people with him. He had dreamed a dream of perfection for them—for foolish humanity which had just jeered at him, but though dejected he is proud of his dream assuring them:

“ ’Twas happy to conceive Rome on a sudden.”

It was there in dejection and misery that the low voice was again heard:

“ A low voice which wound into my heart.”

The “ Voice ” related the cause of his misery, bade him wake, to cease to count the first step as the last, showed his mistake of expecting

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to vault to the last step without patient climbing from the first. It showed the slow steps of progress, the wide gap between vision and performance:

“ Be man now it urged: Let those glances fall,
The basis, the beginning step of all,
Which proves you just a man—is that gone too? ”

The “ Voice ” related the black writing of evolution, progress from great workman to great workman, not from father to son:

“ For one thrust forward fifty such fall back.”

It urged the lesson of faithful work:

“‘ If one step’s awry, one bulge
 Calls for correction by a step we
 thought
 Got over long since, why till that is
 wrought
 No progress . . . ’twere o’er-leaping
 work
 Some one must do before, howe’er
 it irk.’
 Sordello groaned—‘ why hast thou
 Imposed my God, a thing thy Paul
 had moaned
 And Moses dropped beneath, on
 me? ’ ”

Unsparingly the Voice goes on,
 shows that each workman is but a
 scaffold, to become in its turn, its
 service done, a thing to spurn.
 Relentlessly it probed his weakness,
 bade him do, not dream, recounted the
 miseries of the people, poor humanity,
 showed him his immediate duty:

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“ Since talking is your trade
There’s Salinguerra left you to persuade.”

“ ‘ Let others seek ’ it whispered
softly,
‘ Thy care is found, thy life’s provision, if thy race
Should be thy mistress, and, into one face
The many faces crowd.’ ”

In “ Sordello ” is revealed Browning’s call to Service to the Race, the hard mistress he ever strove to please, could never satisfy, so exacting, so voracious, so unsparing of the individual is the demand of that ideal, devotion to Race.

When the Voice ceased Sordello passed calm to that interview with great Salinguerra, to re-affirm his conviction:

“ 'Twere fittest keep the Guelfs in rule.”

He renewed his pleading under the great man's undisguised contempt, open disinclination to listen, amusement, then ridicule of Sordello's claim for the poet's mission, his vocation to help the cause of Humanity.

Here is unfolded Browning's great belief in the power of poetry to open the soul, unlock its energies, expand the brain by generating those heats by which brain matter is made efficient.

The ancients conceived power springing full-born from the brain, says Emerson, and, he asserts that, in the dance of God, there is not

one of the chorus but can and will begin to spin whenever the music and the figure reach his place and duty.

Persevere along the right lines of emotion say the great transcendentalists, and by some complex imaginative act new powers are laid hold of, new forces come into contact with, new avenues of energy opened up: the Ought, the Duty," asserts Emerson, "is one with science and beauty and joy."

Browning packs his belief in a couplet:

"O world as God has made it! All
is beauty,
And knowing this is love, and love
is duty."

Visible beauty, says Browning, is the means provided by which to mount to unseen beauty: when intuition of the beauty of the whole bursts into the mind the last secret is yielded up: when we are safest in our rational unbelief, says the great Blougram, a great strain of music, noble verse of poetry, the death of a friend undoes us, and the "Grand Perhaps" looms and beckons, and the great moment, mayhap, is upon us when, as Sordello expresses it:

"The scaled eyeball owns the mystic rod
Visibly through his garden walketh
God."

Sordello's lofty conception of the

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power of poetry was absolute nonsense to the great man of the day. During its exposition:

“ The Chief immeasurably yawned,”

so spurring Sordello on, for he was one:

“ Whom vanity nigh slew contempt shall save.”

It is indignation draws from us our greatest forces, says Emerson, “ indignation, which arms itself with secret forces, which do not awake till we are pricked and stung and sorely assailed.”

There must be laws at work under this strife of Ghibelline and Guelf, says Sordello. There must be

a solution of life's problem says the baffled muser. Sordello's past is probed for its meaning. Why life seemed made up of crossing ways—a sense of incompleteness demanding completion, eager desire to serve demanding something to serve, power within longing for power without to control its sea, as the moon the tides. What if there were a cause to champion? "Sorrow fell upon him in the beginning. Why?"

"Ah my poor Sordello," says Browning, again dropping the cloak, I speak for you and tell you what was wrong.

"Sorrow fell upon you because you attempted to fit the infinite into your finite. Mind cannot bind spirit

to matter, mind may only reach out to the infinite, must recognize matter's bounded nature, accept its limitations, at the same time reach out beyond it through the soul's grasp of faith.

"Ah my poor Sordello," he says, "I tell you of a Power above Beauty, above formless Altruism, which you can serve:

'Who being for authority the same
Communication different—should
claim

A course, the first-chose but this
last revealed

This Human clear, as that Divine
. concealed.' "

In "A Death in the Desert," this need of Sordello is described—the faith of Christian mysticism, that:

“ The acknowledgment of God in
Christ
Accepted by the reason solves for
thee
All difficulties in the earth and out
of it,
And has so far advanced thee to be
wise.”

Like Tennyson, Browning ever
felt that:

“ Sentinel,
Who moves about from place to
place
And whispers to the world of space,
In the deep night that all is well.”

“ That one face, far from vanish,
rather grows
Or decomposes, but to recompose,
Become my universe that feels and
knows,”

is his answer to Renan. “ Use my
telescope,” he invites and see “ the

star that opened its soul to me—
Therefore I love it.”

“How forget the thrill through
and through me,” he confesses in
“Fears and Scruples,”

“....as I thought. The gladlier
Lives my friend because I love him
still.”

Just when Christ captured
Browning's imagination again, he
jealously refused to disclose, except
through his poems. “Christmas
Eve” and “Easter Day” reflect
this lofty conception of Christ living
and guiding, judging the soul here
and now where it stands. It
and The Epistle of Karshish are
the pinnacles of Christian mysticism

—the only mysticism of Browning. The dealings of God above with the individual soul beneath is the well spring of wonder, real romance of life he asserts.

This mystical apprehension of a living and guiding, loving power in the apparent void is put concretely in the poem "Christmas Eve." The mystical bar of judgment, the test of Christ, the presentment of a living judge, proving man's soul is placed before us in "Easter Day."

In Saul this Messianic intuition is pictured bursting upon David, the intuition Browning in person voiced as Sordello's need in his despair, the intuition, "All's love yet all's law."

He reels out into the night drunken

with the splendour of the conception
—the stars beat with emotion—
darkness fades to day's tender birth
—the shuddering forest holds its
breath—startled beasts bear off—
birds rose stiff and heavily—e'en the
serpent that slid away silent—he felt
the new law.

“This world's no blot for us,”
says Browning,
“Nor blank, it means intensely, and
means good!
To find its meaning is my meat and
drink.”

“Keep for ever looking,” he advises, “whether with the body's eye or the mind's, and you will soon find something to look on.”

“Poetry,” says Emerson, “is a

lonely faith—a lonely protest in the uproar of atheism. The true poet writes out of a real experience. In proportion to the depth of his thought is his defiance of his readers.

Into the poem of "Sordello" is packed the history of a soul's evolution, and superadded to the recital is declared what that soul intended to put its seeing to, its purpose to show the invisible by means of the visible in order to pass on the Vision and the Voice.

It was not to be an easy task, perhaps fruitless. "Shake my hand in heaven my brother," says Sordello to the future "Seer," who can use and make visible to others what he "Sees."

Will the next "Seer" ticket and placard his secret he queries in a later poem.

This romance of interior development, enlarging consciousnesses, quickened perceptions, those up-rushes of emotion which pull the more into the less, those entreatments of the great circle of the Infinite by the small circle of the finite, is the Romance of Soul. From childhood's compassing of self perception to adult's crowning conception of God, and the intuition of the spiritual world round the visible world, the whole apprehended from its parts, the last secret of life emerges, says Browning.

Under the voluminous drapery of Sordello is pictured a soul moving

on, plied by beauty visible and invisible, beauty of nature, beauty of art, the wonders of Nature, of young love, love personal, love altruistic, love Divine. Out of unexpected crises of differing emotion we see truth issuing, power resulting, new problems rising, new ravishments, new duties, new hopes, new ideals.

The method Sordello's Ideal of Service to Humanity was to follow is stated:

“ I offer to serve the Crowd
To give life up in service to . . . only
grant
That I do serve.”

All the first principles of Browning lie in “Paracelsus” and “Sordello”—that opposition is soul's salvation—

that every individual stress is challenge to life to give up its best—that around man's soul a perpetual dance of circumstance plays to try it and test it, and mould it to the impress of its next stage—that it is out of great crises of emotion man comes upon Truth—that life is man's one chance of bringing his soul to birth—that, marvel as man appears, he is an unfinished piece of work—that, apparently the end of the evolutionary process, he is but the theatre of further evolutionary processes, transferred from body to brain—that this life is testing ground for another, life's prime business being to develop the wings which sleep in the worm, using the chrysalis

constantly as a symbol of life's further enlargement.

In "Fifine at the Fair" we come upon his deliberate purpose, to catch, like Hamlet, the conscience of his audience, by dramatic representation of truths he believed it was the human being's nature to respond to at some time or other during life. His poetry was to be apparently counterfeit, yet so deeply freighted with truths of individual experience, that, but go deep enough, they must reach the general heart of mankind—he believed that rakish Fifine could penetrate where stately Elvire would be excluded.

To teach men he believed it necessary:

“ To see the deed be brought
To look like nothing done with any
such intent.”

Just unable to fly one swims,
says the Prologue, with head aspire
to truth; with hands, explore the
false below; to make, you must be
marred; to raise your race, must
stoop.

From this mistress his soul stretch-
ed “ frenetic to be free ” at times.
The sight of the losel, irresponsible
gypsies raises the old question of
race responsibility. Why should some
feel the burden so grievously? Why
should some have to slight the day's
delight for the hereafter, as Sordello
questioned.

It was at sight of the poor Fifines

of the world, Browning's humanitarianism arose, poor bedraggled flowers of womanhood who plucked his arm on some water-lapped stair of Thames. As he saw the gypsies stealing into the town in the dusk he wondered if some electric snap awaited him to set creative power flowing. It was indignation at the actual Fifine's treatment set fire to his energies, the spark of indignation—the real Fifine did her part—and a long review of his past, his motives, accomplishments, confessions, compromises, faiths, and speculations follows—link by link, a long chain of reflections on life upon his choice of the false to convey his freight of the true, is forged, begin-

ning at Pornic Town, taking flight to Venice in sequence of thought. In "Fifine at the Fair" Browning pleads his justification for presenting his truths by dramatic presentment. To blend the ideal into workable stuff of life was his problem. Man is a lordly stag and must be stalked warily. Service to this mistress he often questions:

"What hand and brain went ever paired?" he begs.

"What heart alike conceived and dared?"

What act proved all its thought had been?

What will but felt the fleshly screen?"

but this unreasonable "she-intelligence" of life had to be obeyed, her

cold, sad, sweet smile was ever hungered for.

His soul's mistress had to be left on the heights alone at times, while art enjoyed itself in the wash of the world below and engaged with the common welter of life—its loves and hates, hopes, fears, disappointments, despairs, joys, raptures, aspirations, adorations, jealousies, meannesses, all the machinery of circumstance designed to give the soul its bent, try it and turn it forth sufficiently impressed, as says Rabbi Ben Ezra:

“If you but knew how I dwelt down here?” he says to this mistress, momentarily left to her heights. “And was I so better off up there,” quoth she.

In "Fifine at the Fair," Browning likens his work to Michael Angelo's half-finished marble:

"You must know I too achieved
Eidothée
In silence and by night—dared justify the lines
Plain to my soul."

He had a passionate desire for England's welfare, was patriot first then poet, artist, aspiring to keep alive fundamental truths of emotion, wonder, worship, faith, which he believed had positive intellectual as well as spiritual value. The finger of God was true source of power he believed, for him the providence of the unseen ever played.

Until man feels his tendency to

God he is not complete, says Paracelsus, until he has "august anticipations of a dim splendour ever on before, he is a failure, the scheme breaks in the hand of its maker, and it is the business of beauty, of love, of art, even of ugliness and hate to open up the soul. Art's business he believed to be to fumble amid the parts in order to re-construct thereby the ultimate whole:

"Art which I may style the love of
loving, rage,
Of knowing, seeing, feeling the absolute truth of things,
For truth's sake, whole and sole, not
any good truth brings
The knower, seer, feeler."

How the idea could seriously have

arisen that "Fifine at the Fair" is a long piece of casuistical argument for conjugal infidelity is strange. At first blush the allusion to Don Juan in the preface might convey that impression to the man in the street, but to the biographer with that deep sense of responsibility to the public he is guiding—as all biographers have—to hand on the falsity implies either not having read the poem, or, having read it, misconceived it.

"Fifine at the Fair" was written in that stuccoed third house by the bridge, at the time when life was trying its dark arts on Browning; that weary, dreary time of late middle life pictured in the Epilogue,

is in direct line of thought from Sordello.

It is a poem of apparent inconstancy. Prologue and Epilogue present the two loves of his life. Was he inconstant to his "Lyric Love," who early slipped her sheath, because he loved life's way and seemed in no hurry to join her flight? Was he constant to the Mistress Humanity's service he bound himself to those glowing days of Sordello, when all earth was palpably fire clothed? Was he faithful to his ideal:

"That bloodless, sexless sprite I call
my queen."

As he faced the question of what he really meant by his Christianity

in "Christmas Eve" and "Easter Day," as he questioned what his faith in life after death really was in "La Saissiaz," he stated his case here, that "man the full blown ingrate" could best be reached by subterfuge; that truths might lodge through dramatic presentment, which, if projected naked, would be rejected. He believed that poor Fifine:

"The rakish craft could slip her
 moorings in the tent,
 Shove little pinnace off, while your
 superior ship
 The Elvire refits in port."

In the long poem of "Sordello" is reflected those magical moments which, be they what they may, says

Wordsworth, are yet the master light of all our seeing—openings out of consciousness, saltations of soul, the number and nature of which, says Emerson, mark the difference between the highest and lowest of mankind.

Moments, he declares, which are for ever memorable can change man's market cart into a chariot of the sun, make him very careful not to cheat his neighbour, draw him from the circumference to the centre of the circle.

Moments, said Carlyle, "God-announcing." Moments, say both Browning and Tennyson, when the soul seems to come on that which "Is" and catch the deep foundations of the world. Flashes from midnight, fire flames from noonday, says

Browning, which cause piled-up honours to perish, swollen ambition to dwindle; moments sure though seldom, which, when they come, seem the sole work of the lifetime which away the rest have trifled.

These moments, say the poets, bear no relation to reason, are pure intuitions, are no sequence to intellectual premises, are all stamped with the same invariable reaction of irresistible desire to share the joy of them with others, to pass on the Voice and the Vision:

“ ‘ O Eternal beam ! ’ prays Dante,
 ‘ give my tongue
 Power, but to leave one sparkle of
 thy glory
 Unto the race to come.’ ”

ROBERT BROWNING III

This opening of the inward eye,
unstopping of the inward ear, is the
romance of soul.

When freezing reason would ques-
tion Tennyson's intuitions,

“ Like a man in wrath the heart
Stood up and answered, ‘ I have
felt.’ ”

“ God has a few of us whom he
whispers in the ear,” says Browning:

“ Let others reason and welcome, 'tis
we musicians know.”

There is a vision, says Plato, which
is the most marvellous of life—
beauty in its very essence—for who-
ever has been rightly instructed by
love. A vision for the sake of which
all former labours and pains were un-

knowingly taken. From this supreme beauty the soul finally learns to know what the very essence of beauty is. There is a voice sometimes heard by the soul which carries conviction of truth and has the force of a revelation. An intuition which bears no relation to reason, is no sequence to intellectual premises, intuition from beginning to end, stamped with the same message.

In "Sordello" attempt is made to picture these transcendental moments, these magical moments, dynamic moments of life, when vital forces seem suddenly to be released, accumulated energy discharged, new knowledge grasped, new conceptions seized, old intuitions irresistibly con-

firmed, Will-o'-the-wisp lights of consciousness seem suddenly to be lifted over the threshold into the steady light of incontrovertible knowledge.

"Sordello" is primarily concerned with this arch mystery of life: it was into the very brain of man himself Browning pressed for the mystery of soul, in those long soliloquies of Sordello. The dramatic background of strife between the temporal and spiritual powers for supremacy was only the background a picture requires, says the Preface: "My stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul."

Never would he have chosen such an expedient for the telling of a

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story he could body forth so well, say
the opening lines:

“ . . . but it seems
Your setters forth of unexampled
 themes,
Makers of quite new men, producing
 them
Would best chalk broadly, on each
 vesture's hem,
The wearer's quality.”

It is a Quixotic adventure, he asserts:

“ I marshal you Life's elemental
 masque:
Show men, on evil or on good lay
 stress,
This light, this shade, make prominent, suppress
All ordinary hues that softening
 blend
Such natures with the level . . .
 . . . Light thwarted breaks
A limpid purity to rainbow flakes.”

“ Would you have your songs endure ? ” says Naddo the critic, “ busiest of his tribe ” :

“ Build upon the human heart ! Why,
to be sure,
Yours is one kind of heart—but I
mean theirs.”

And life is short, soliloquizes Sor-dello. He can do very little at best, but should he fail because the results must be poor ? What outside powers are there to help him on his difficult way ?

“ Oh, ’twere too absurd to slight
For the hereafter the day’s delight.”

The argument for the Now against the For Ever is threshed out in those long monologues. His action is called for by his country—this time of

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transition commands him take a side—he symbolizes the conclusion in the eyes fixed above, hand raised in protest for the spiritual, the intangible, of Sordello, with the badge of temporal dashed beneath his feet.

Without the co-operation of man himself Browning believed the Creator was powerless to bring his plan to completion.

“ As I am a man,” he says, in “ La Saissiaz ”:

“ I mourn this poverty I impute to
God.
Such as man is, limited, bounded, I
conceive God to be.”

To man himself God leaves the completion of man, he believed; he believed the Christian Church was

trustee and executor of primal forces necessary to man's full evolution and decided to put his shoulder under the apparently crumbling edifice, engaging in a guerilla warfare for the cause he conceived himself better serving so.

There was a time, we are told, when he seriously debated the question with himself of joining the ministry of the Christian Church.

Personal opinion is not necessarily truth, he confesses, and has reflected the mystery of point of view consummately in the "Ring and the Book." There, amidst the bias of self-interest and personal standpoint, must at the same time be actual truth to track down, as there is in every story, regardless of comment upon it.

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But only for his own point of view he speaks in "La Saissiaz." The power and purpose of God he beholds, "so can—hope."

He at least believed in soul was very sure of God.

Allow the hypothesis of the "Grand Perhaps," he says, and life falls into orderly march, as Copernicus is allowed his, Darwin his. His hypothesis worked for him, it would do so for all, he believed. In his own soul he saw, written, the writing on the inward parts of all waiting for the lantern to illuminate it.

"This good God—what he could do if he would . . .

Why not, 'The Way, the Truth, the Life'?"

The conception of a singer passing through life influencing human beings unknown to them flashed upon Browning, we are told, in Dulwich Wood, one of his sacred places.

“All service ranks the same with God” was the summing-up of Sor-dello.

“All service ranks the same with God,” sings humble Pippa, the little child of Asolo:

“With God whose puppets best and worst are we.”

Those who think Browning advises Duke Ferdinand and the bride of the Riccardi to put an end to sin by committing further sin should

view the pair in the first picture of "Pippa Passes."

Perhaps Browning considered it best for the race that such should even violently die in their treachery than live the corroding lie of the pair in the "Statue and the Bust." The unlit lamp, the ungirt loin, were the prime sins against nature to him, but the end of temptation need not be treachery, the gratification of passion need not be the inevitable consequence. This lurid picture of Ottima and Sebald's love turning to loathing, caressing to murdering, gives pause to a somewhat popular reading of the "Statue and the Bust." The wrong done to human beings by the old false interpretation of

"Fifine at the Fair" is probably enormous, for, this many a year now, Browning's name has been one to conjure with both for good and evil.

"God must be glad," says Luigi, the patriot, in "Pippa Passes," "that one loves his earth so much":

"I can give news of earth to all the
dead
Who ask me: last year's sunsets and
great stars,
Which had a right to come first, and
see ebb
The crimson wave that drifts the sun
away.
Those crescent moons with notched
and burning rims
That strengthened into sharp fire—
and that day
In March a double rainbow stopped
the storm.

May's warm, slow, mellow moonlit
 summer nights—
 Gone are they, but I have them in
 my soul."

Luigi, who sings his heart's hope so
 lyrically sweet:

"You'll love me yet!—and I can
 tarry
 Your love's protracted growing:
 June reared the bunch of flowers you
 carry
 From seeds of April's sowing.

I plant a heartful now: some seed
 At least is sure to strike
 And yield—what you'll not pluck,
 indeed,
 Not love, but may be, like."

Into the mouth of the student
 Schramm is placed his cherished
 faith in the flux of life, and the ever-

new faculty of wonder rising to meet novel objects of wonder. All the great faiths of Abt Vogler and Rabbi Ben Ezra are here in the bud—nothing of worth is ever lost, all the accumulations of beauty recur in nature; great emotion rises in gathering tide to God:

“Enough that He heard it once, we shall hear it by-and-bye.”

As Pippa's song falls into the life of Monsignor, the corrupt prelate, his lower self is slain, the tempter is gagged and banished:

“I know not half he dares—but remove him—quick!”

Into the heart of Jules chivalry springs for the outcast girl foisted

upon him. As the song of Pippa reaches him he springs, as Caponsacchi springs later, to helpless woman's appeal. Humanity rises in the heart of Jules, the artist: he rises at the call to new regions of power and accomplishment:

“ Is she wronged? To the rescue of
her honour, my heart.
Is she poor? What costs it to be
styled a donor? ”

Beauty that solaced the soul of Xerxes, and turned him from his path for a whole day, has positive worth for the soul, says Browning. All the emotions have positive worth to the soul, he believed, and that poetry could produce deeds, but not by deeds, arouse action, lever the

soul to new heights, could breed strength, courage, fortitude, faith, was his conviction, which he turned to the conduct shadowed in "Sordello": to endeavour, by "dim, vulgar, vast, unobvious work," to lift humanity's "dim, vulgar, vast, unobvious grief."

To present his light as nature does, by breaking it upon obstruction, to be a "maker-see," to enable others to "Soar into many a hoard of fancies of their own," as he had been able to unlock his fount by the poetry of others before him, was his dream.

The sage little knows how his light grows, says Paracelsus, "knows little what unlocks his fount." Truth arises

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mysteriously as cloud of cape from
air, he asserts,

“ Some slight film
The interposing bar which binds a
soul
And makes the idiot, just as makes
the sage
Some film removed.”

Because man cannot understand
Christianity, he asserts, he must not
pull down lightly what has been so
painfully built up:

“ Hans must not burn Kant's house
above his head
Because he cannot understand Kant's
book.”

So chameleon-hued a mistress is
service to race that what she bade

Shelley attempt to pull down, she bade Browning attempt to build up.

With Cleon the intellectual, with Karshish the scientist, with John the Beloved, he gazes at that phenomenon—that life, that death—and having considered how hard it is to be a Christian that mid-nineteenth century, he, like Cleon, like Karshish, like John, questions the meaning of the story, and decides to tell as strange a thing as ever happened to our kind. In considered resolve he determines to tell this thing, but feels it is all going into vacancy.

After flinging from the little chapel in a gust of disparaging emotion, asking, like Sordello: “Are these and these fit subjects for the Shining

City? " he has the " Vision of Christmas Eve " as he determines to face the question:

" Fairly and frankly, what might be
That history, that faith to me in some
domain

Built up and peopled in my brain?
How were my case now, did I fall
Dead here this minute—should I lie
Faithful or faithless? . . .

. . . for soberly now—who
Should be a Christian if not you? "

the " Judgment of Easter Day " begins.

The watcher on the common relates two strange experiences he had had on the same spot:

" Was it all a dream? " he questions.

" Was this a vision? False or true?

Commonly my mind is bent
To think it was a dream."

"Be all the earth a wilderness, but leave me faith," is the result of the dream's summing up—faith by which to go on trying, proving, rejecting, struggling, happy to be thwarted as man, not left in God's contempt apart,

"To a ghastly smooth life dead at heart."

The chief of human difficulties is faith, is the conclusion of the matter to that famous watcher on the common. Could man know command of God's is God's indeed, what obedience would follow, but:

“ Be it a mad dream or God’s very
 breath,
 The fact’s the same—belief’s fire
 once in us.”

“ It is the glory and the good of
 art,” the poet writes, concluding “The
 Ring and the Book ”:

“ That art remains the one way pos-
 sible
 Of speaking truths, to mouths like
 mine at least.
 How look a brother in the face and
 say,
 ‘ Thy right is wrong, eyes hast thou
 yet art blind,
 Thine ears are stuffed and stopped
 despite their length,
 And, oh! the foolishness thou count-
 est faith! ’
 But art,—wherein man nowise
 speaks to men,
 Only to mankind,—art may tell a
 truth

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Obliquely, do the thing shall breed
the thought,
So write a book shall mean beyond
the facts,
Suffice the eye and save the soul be-
side.
 It lives,
If precious be the soul of man to
man."

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